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AUTHOR	Leming, Robert S.
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ABSTRACT

"We the People...The Citizen and the Constitution" is a national civic education program that aims to help elementary and secondary students understand the history and principles of constitutional government. The program focuses on the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and fosters civic competence and responsibility among students in public and private schools. The "We the People..." curriculum, written in consultation with leading U.S. scholars and educators, was developed by the Center for Civic Education and is funded presently by the U.S. Department of Education through an act of Congress. Students demonstrate their mastery of the course content two ways: (1) in a written assessment, and (2) in a simulated congressional hearing in which the entire class participates. In the hearings, groups of three to six students serve as expert witnesses appearing before a panel of community members acting as congressional committee members. High school classes may participate in congressional district, state, and national-level competitions. The winning class from each state represents its state at the annual national finals held in Washington, D.C. Cited research studies validate the educational effects of the "We the People..." program. Information is provided about how to learn more about "We the People..." and how to obtain program materials. Contains 12 references. (LAP)

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Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47408
812-855-3838

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We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution

by Robert S. Leming

"We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution" is a national civic education program that helps elementary and secondary students understand the history and principles of our constitutional government. In addition, the program helps students develop a reasoned commitment to values that are integral to sustaining a democratic society. The program focuses on the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and fosters civic competence and responsibility among students in public and private schools. The program is administered nationally by the Center for Civic Education through a network of 435 congressional district coordinators and 50 state coordinators. The program also includes the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. More than 20 million students and 70,000 teachers have been involved in the "We the People..." program.

The "We the People..." Curriculum. The "We the People..." curriculum was developed by the Center for Civic Education and is presently funded by the U.S. Department of Education through an act of Congress. The program began in 1987 under the auspices of the Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. The curriculum was written in consultation with leading scholars and educators from throughout the United States.

The upper elementary, middle, and high school textbooks examine the history and principles found in our Constitution and Bill of Rights through lessons that correspond to the essential questions guiding the National Standards for Civics and Government. The following are unit titles for the high school textbook: What are the philosophical and historical foundations of the American political system? How did the framers create the Constitution? How did the values and principles embodied in the Constitution shape American institutions and practices? How have the protections of the Bill of Rights been developed and expanded? What rights does the Bill of Rights protect? What are the roles of the citizen in American society? The unit questions in the upper elementary and middle school textbooks are similar in content. The "We the People..." curriculum complements the regular school curriculum and enhances the study of history and government. Students are encouraged to use critical thinking skills in a cooperative effort to master the content of the course and then demonstrate their knowledge through written and verbal assessments.

The Simulated Congressional Hearing. In addition to a comprehensive written test, the Center for Civic Education has also developed a culminating activity that simulates a congressional hearing. The hearing enables students to demonstrate through written speeches and oral communication what they have learned during the study of the textbook. Groups of three to six students participate as expert witnesses appearing before a panel of community members acting as congressional committee members. The hearings involve the whole class; students are responsible for the entire curriculum and specialize in one of the six units of the "We the People..." textbook (five units in the upper elementary textbook). Teachers are encouraged to involve community member experts as resources in their classrooms during preparation for the hearings.

The congressional hearing involves two parts. First, students present their prepared four-minute statements that answer unit questions designed by the Center for Civic Education. During the second part (six minutes), judges ask follow-up questions to probe the extent of students' understanding of the Constitution and constitutional issues. A panel of judges evaluates student responses using the criteria of understanding, constitutional application, reasoning, supporting evidence, responsiveness, and participation. Both the prepared questions developed by the Center and the follow-up questions asked by the judges are designed to help students reach higher levels of thinking.

At elementary and middle school levels, hearings are noncompetitive and can be conducted any time during the school year in the classroom or in more elaborate settings that encourage parents and community members to be involved as judges or observers. High school classes may conduct the hearings as a single class event or may choose to participate in congressional district, state, and national level competitions. Each year in the fall and early winter, classes throughout the nation participate in congressional district hearings. The winning class from each congressional district attends a state final held in the winter. The winning class at the state level represents the state at the national finals held in Washington, DC in late April.

Research Studies Confirm Effects of the Program. The Program Effectiveness Panel of the U.S. Department of Education's National Diffusion Network examined the reports of various research studies on the "We the People..." program and validated the powerful educational effects of the program on students' civic knowledge and attitudes. Several studies by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in 1988, 1990, and 1991 concluded that students enrolled in the "We the People..." program at upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels "significantly outperformed comparison students on every topic of the tests taken."

In 1994, Stanford University Professor Richard Brody's study entitled, *Secondary Education and Political Attitudes: Examining the Effects of Political Tolerance of the "We the People..." Curriculum*, found that high school students taking part in the "We the People..." program develop a stronger attachment to political beliefs, attitudes, and values essential to living in a democracy than other students and most adults. The Brody study, based on 1,351 student responses, suggests that students involved in the "We the People..." program exhibit more political tolerance. They would place fewer restrictions on the speech, press, and the freedom of assembly of groups with diverse opinions, and they would place fewer restrictions on due process. In addition, the study revealed that students involved in the competitive format are more interested in politics, feel more politically effective, and perceive fewer limits on their own political freedom.

In 1994, the Council for Basic Education (CBE) conducted

Robert S. Leming is the Director of the Indiana Program for Law-Related Education at the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University.

ethnographic case studies on the effects of the "We the People..." program in an effort to assess attributes that are not amenable to quantification. The Council's research indicates that "teachers feel excited and renewed.... Students are enthusiastic about what they have been able to accomplish, especially in terms of their ability to carry out a reasoned argument. They have become energized about their place as citizens of the United States" (Council for Basic Education 1994). The case studies also reveal that "without exception, teachers asserted that the [simulated congressional hearing] competition had a significant effect on student learning" (Council for Basic Education 1994).

The findings of an earlier study by the Council for Basic Education supported by the Office of Technology Assessment of the U.S. Congress substantiated the effectiveness of the "We the People..." program in goal attainment and higher level student learning. In her 1992 *Testing for Learning*, based on the findings of that study, author and principal investigator Ruth Mitchell asserts: "The competition has enormous potential as a model for the evaluation of history/social studies and government classes. It is the most imaginative and well-organized social studies assessment I know of—more impressive than current ideas at the state level."

In 1993, the Social Studies Development Center conducted a study examining the understanding of the Bill of Rights by high school students. The study compared 477 students who attended traditional government classes with 375 students who attended classes involved in the "We the People..." program. The results of the study indicate that 79% of the students enrolled in the classes using the "We the People..." curriculum performed better than the students enrolled in the traditional government classes. This "suggests that students participating in the 'We the People...' program gained knowledge and understanding of the Bill of Rights that is superior to students in government classes using traditional textbooks" (Leming 1993).

Information about the "We the People..." Program. For more information about the program, contact the Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, California 91302-1467. The telephone number is (800) 350-4223. The fax number is (818) 591-9330. The e-mail address is center4civ@aol.com.

"We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution" high school classroom sets include 30 student books, a teacher's guide, a program participation handbook, 30 multiple choice tests, materials for performance assessment, and 30 certificates of achievement. A classroom set costs $250 plus 10% for shipping and handling costs. The student book is $10 (over 10 copies - $9 each). The teacher's guide is $7.50.

The middle school and upper elementary classroom sets include 30 *"We the People..."* student books and teacher's guide, the supplementary student text *With Liberty and Justice for All* and teacher's handbook, an instructional packet, 30 multiple choice tests, materials for performance assessment, and 30 certificates of achievement. The middle school classroom set costs $160 plus 10% for shipping and handling costs and the upper elementary classroom set costs $150 plus 10% for shipping and handling costs.

A few sets are available to each United States congressional district FREE OF CHARGE. Contact the Center for Civic Education for additional information.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia, 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, announced monthly in the CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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